

Finding a New Home

Profiles of five Asian American pastors | IAN WRISLEY

In recent years the Covenant has seen significant growth among Asian American churches and pastors. Currently there are nearly thirty Asian American churches, in addition to more than twenty immigrant ministries in Korean, Chinese, and Southeast Asian churches. This growth illustrates a commitment to ethnic diversity and is organic both in its intentionality and its spontaneity. Clearly denominational leadership has actively cultivated relationships with a variety of ethnic groups, but those efforts have not been intended as nor perceived as simply a pursuit of unreached demographics. At the same time, as Peter Cha puts it, the Covenant is quickly becoming a known entity among Asian American pastors and parishioners.

The following profiles are snapshots of five Asian American Covenant pastors. They illustrate both diversity and similarities among this population. The pastors come from different parts of the United States. Some moved to this country as children, others trace their American roots back several generations. They have varying approaches to how they do church, and represent a variety of church backgrounds. At the same time, all five are men. All have been involved in new church starts. All came into the Covenant after several years of ministry in different contexts. They are all part of the new face of the Evangelical Covenant Church.



PETER CHA

Academia can be defined both as a world unto itself and as a window to the rest of the world. That may be especially true in the social sciences, and perhaps even more so when theology and sociology meet. Peter Cha, who teaches pastoral theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, is required by his profession to be both a teacher and an observer, to tell and to hear.

According to Cha, he hears that the Covenant is a known entity among Asian Americans. When asked why that is, he notes the historical and

contemporary sense of mission among Covenanters. Like many others of different backgrounds, Asian Americans may see their own passions reflected in the denomination, in the missional twins of evangelism and social justice.

That's what attracted Cha to the Covenant in the first place. In 1997, after having served as a Presbyterian pastor, he "began looking for a new home," he says. Through the mentorship of Covenant minister and Trinity professor David Larsen, he attended the Midwinter Conference. He found, he says, a "minimalist approach" to the gospel and theology, an approach that expresses a "deep commitment to the gospel of Christ and to the

authority of the Scriptures while being flexible about secondary doctrinal issues.”

That minimalist approach gives birth to a diverse evangelicalism—baptismal freedom, racial and ethnic inclusivity, an obvious identification with issues of justice, and affirmation of women in ministry. All of those are areas of discussion among Covenanters, but it is important to be reminded what distinctive markers of our identity they are.

Peter Cha is probably the best kind of person to remind us. He came to the Covenant after experiencing the church in other ways, and he has made a career of watching the church. His current role as a pastoral theologian focuses on “social and cultural exegesis,” seeing how faith and culture interact. Cha identifies himself as a “1.5” generation Korean American, having come to the United States from South Korea when he was twelve. Like some of the others profiled here, he might, as a result, be especially attuned to what’s happening in the broader world, and what is unique about his own denomination.

In addition, Cha is very aware of emergent expressions of the church and serves as a critic in the truest sense. He applauds what he sees as positive and warns against those practices and streams of thought that he thinks might be less than useful. He also serves the Covenant as a point person, not only for Asian Americans but for others as well. He has learned the art of mentorship and has been instrumental in helping others come into the Covenant.

EUGENE CHO

Fighting global poverty requires passion. And audacity. Eugene Cho has both. In May he blogged about human trafficking: “I really believe there are times when



the church needs to have a deep anger about the grave injustices of the world, particularly when it comes to the exploitation of children. Have we reduced our faith to convenient and self-serving pleasantries?”

Nothing watered down about that. We can’t tell you here what the blog entry was titled—it’s too audacious. Cho describes himself as a follower of Christ, a husband, father, pastor, fighter of global poverty, an advocate.

He also calls himself a citizen of the world, with good reason. Born in South Korea, Cho immigrated to the United States with his family when he was six. His grandparents were among the first Christians in their village in what would become North Korea. Because of life-threatening persecution, they fled south, to the area that would eventually become South Korea.

Cho grew up in San Francisco, attended university in California, then sojourned on the East Coast while attending Princeton Seminary. After a couple of years in South Korea, and a few more on staff at a large American suburban church, he landed in Seattle to found Quest, at first a nondenomi-

national congregation. It is this personal history that shapes the way he sees the world. “Christ and culture inform me,” he says.

As he began planting the church in 2000, there was an immediate need for connection, and a search was on for “what tribe might resonate with us.” Thus began a long courtship with Interbay Covenant Church and a growing, generative relationship with the Evangelical Covenant Church.

In addition to being the pastor at Quest, Cho is also the executive director of Q Café, a nonprofit community café and music venue that exemplifies his fight for global justice. Their coffee is fair trade or direct trade, promoting both environ-

mental and economic justice. Ten percent of sales go to outside nonprofits.

If you want to rent a meeting room in the building, or a “conference corner” or the entire café, there are different rates for businesses and nonprofits. There’s even a special rate for benefit shows. And, like coffee shops everywhere, Q hosts events, but with a twist: local artists display their work on the walls, music ranges from local talent to national acts like Tyrone Wells and Nickel Creek, films are screened, resources are collected for the homeless community, and other events are hosted geared toward raising awareness of issues and causes, both local and global.

If that wasn’t enough, Cho and his wife, Minhee, are helping to organize One Day’s Wages, a grassroots organization that hopes to inspire people to give one day’s wages to work against extreme poverty. (For more information go to www.onedayswages.org.)

Cho says he resonates with the mission and vision of the Covenant, its passion for Jesus, and high view of Scripture. There is, he says, within the denomination a strong sense of mission, both global and local, which

includes addressing global poverty and church planting. Further, the Covenant understands almost innately the need for change and the necessity of engaging in truly uncomfortable conversations about privilege and place.

In other words, many of the issues that drive a fighter of global poverty.

PETER SUNG

Mission friends are adaptable. They read their Bibles and their communities. They're good at contextualizing the faith they wish to share. That's true of thirty-six-year-old Peter Sung, newly appointed director of church planting in the Department of Church Growth and Evangelism. It's the Covenant's ethos that drew him and continues to draw him; he appreciates the solid cores and diverse freedoms afforded by the Covenant.

Giving freedom is risky, and isn't innate to parents of any stripe, but to Korean immigrants it can be frightening. Sung's parents, who brought their eight-year-old son to New York from South Korea in August 1981, were risk takers. That seems to have rubbed off on Sung and his sisters. Their parents started several businesses and planted churches. One of Sung's sisters owns her own company and another is a self-employed lawyer. Sung has planted six churches and now helps others do the same.

Even though the family attended a rather conservative Presbyterian church in South Korea, in New York, says Sung, "Immigrants go to whatever church whose van picks them up at the airport." It's no surprise that in a city as diverse as New York,

the high-school-aged Sung found his way into a charismatic multiethnic congregation. It was the multiethnic flavor that attracted him. He found it interesting in a way that monocultural experiences can never be. It says something about Sung's parents that they didn't read his changing faith expression as rejection. And, he says, he didn't reject his Korean culture; instead, he grew from it.

At university, Sung was one of the few Asian Americans in his InterVarsity chapter, a situation he found troubling, not because he felt out of place



but because he still found monocultural fellowship boring. It disturbed him that Asian Americans still flocked together, even though they were as American as his white InterVarsity friends.

It was while he was planting a church in Boston and attending Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

that Sung first heard about the Covenant through a professor. In the Covenant Sung found a body that "God has been preserving for such a time as this," he says. What makes the Covenant the Covenant might be hard to define, but it is the sense of a solid core without the need for clearly defined boundary rules that attracted him.

When asked how he fits into the Covenant, Sung has already thought it through. He calls himself a strategic bridge builder. He's "out there." He can see things from a new perspective and draw in diverse people. At the same time, he's safe, he says, because he's good with the established churches, and appreciates "the old-school Covenant."

STEVE WONG

One of the strengths of Asian American culture in general and Asian American churches within the Covenant in particular is a built-in multiculturalism. After all, to be defined as broadly as a continent is to be filled with both connections and contradictions.

Steve Wong, a fourth-generation Chinese American native of San Francisco, sees that strength in action in his congregation's way of doing church. And his personal story bears this out. Wong says he's comfortable in both mainstream American culture and the Chinese American community. Both modes of operation help him as he pastors Grace Community Covenant Church in Palo Alto, California.

Working with Asian Americans of many backgrounds necessitates learning what Wong, who is fifty,

calls, "new rhythms of communication." Grace has ancestral roots all over Asia, including Japan, China, the Philippines, Hong Kong, and Thailand.



In a context of such broad ethnicities, Wong notes, "people have to make concessions to one another's cultures." It is those kinds of genuine concessions and mutual accommodations that make Asian American churches perhaps uniquely fitted to live in a pluralistic, postmodern world.

Being fitted to a task and accomplishing that task are two different things, which is one of the reasons Wong founded Grace. And it's one of the things that make Grace Com-

munity and the Covenant an obvious pairing.

Wong, who holds a PhD in clinical psychology with an emphasis on Asian American young adult development, founded the church in 1997 with the vision of reaching Asian Americans and their friends. He refers to himself as a church founder, not a church planter, since he has no intention of traveling around starting new churches. Grace was, he says, a response to God's leading.

When the core of what would become Grace Community Covenant Church began coalescing, Wong didn't want to pastor an independent congregation. Rather, he wanted to have a relationship of accountability and support. After he investigated several denominations, the Covenant struck him as healthy, with values closely aligned to his own. He had already had a positive experience with First Covenant Church in San Francisco. His mother, who was active in Child Evangelism Fellowship, had found the church welcoming in her work.

Eventually, Grace would find a home at Foothill Covenant Church in Los Altos, where they would stay until 2004. They left for new accommodations because, says Wong, "We had been treated so well we were like adult kids still living at home. It was time to move to our own 'apartment' and test our mettle."

Like many newcomers to the Covenant, Wong and his wife, Winnie, were impressed with what might seem like contradictions in other parts of the Christian world—a unique mix of piety and action, or evangelicalism and social justice. Wong also felt strongly the collegiality in the ministerium of the Pacific Southwest Conference.

PETER HONG

Twenty or thirty years ago the homogeneous unit principle reigned in church planting circles. Basically the assumption was "birds of a feather" and so on. While one might take issue with the underlying assumptions, sociologically it's true.

About ten years ago, "multiethnic" became a kind of catch phrase in church planting. For a while, that looked like a game of least common denominators—a Swedish hymn and an African American spiritual followed by a foot-washing liturgy in Spanish.

Peter Hong could have jumped right into either approach. He thinks that he has been prepared for one of two kinds of ministry—either a fully Korean church, or a multiethnic congregation. Hong, thirty-nine, pastors New Community Covenant Church in Chicago, a multiethnic congregation that tries to avoid superficialities and be a truly relational community. As he puts it, "We try to be biblically and theologically about the kingdom."

That kind of vision is manifested in a multiethnic community that is committed to justice. A kingdom-of-God perspective helps shape a church that is intentionally racially and economically diverse, one that welcomes the homeless and makes a place for the new believer.

Hong says, "The trajectory of my life suits me for church planting."



When he was ten the family moved from South Korea to Chicago so Hong's father could pursue a doctorate in English literature. It was a household of deep reverence, respect for community (and family), and profound spirituality in a family whose Christian faith stretches back three generations.

The city became home for Hong, the place that held his heart. Chicago's density and diversity fed him, as did his broad church experience, which ranged from a Korean Presbyterian Church (PCUSA), to a charismatic non-denominational church while he was a student at Purdue University, to a stint with Youth With A Mission, to pastoring a Christian Missionary Alliance church during seminary at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. It was the connections in all these experiences that Hong valued. In fact, he says, "there were no negative stops on this journey." One of those connections, being mentored by Peter Cha at Trinity, led to another relationship, this time with the Covenant.

Cha introduced Hong to Gary Walter, who in 1999 was the director of church planting for the denomination. Walter listened carefully as Hong laid out his vision of a truly multiethnic congregation committed to issues of justice in Chicago. Then Walter shared his own vision of the Covenant's future with Hong, and the two found a connection. In 2001 Hong and a group of friends began laying the groundwork for a New Community. ■

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